

## Lessons learned for Afghanistan

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Afghanistan has been called “the right war”; “a war we can win”; “the war we should have been fighting all along.” This should set off loud alarms because it suggests that military victory in Afghanistan will be nearly automatic if we just show up with enough troops. And, once again, some of our top military and political leaders are planning ahead for the last war; in this case, they’re trying to duplicate the so-called victory in Iraq.

Any notions of certainty are both frightening and naive. Frightening, because they’re founded in the belief that all we have to do is disengage our combat brigades from Iraq and redeploy them to Afghanistan to re-create the success we achieved eight years ago against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Naive, because they’re based on the recurring fantasy that 30,000 more U.S. troops will transform Afghanistan into an ersatz version of a Muslim democracy. Like Iraq.

Of course, Iraq today — despite claims from neocons and Clinton-Bush-era nation builders — is hardly stable, harmonious or peaceful, except when compared with the sectarian nightmare of Iraq from 2005 to 2007. However, even then, Iraq wasn’t Afghanistan; not even close. To begin with, Afghanistan is a honeycomb of ethnic groups and tribes. About half its people are Pashtuns, from more than 30 different tribes; an additional 25 percent are Tajiks; 18 percent, Hazaras; 6 percent, Uzbeks; 3 percent, Turkmen; 1 percent, Qizilbash; and about 7 percent are Aimaq, Arab, Kirghiz, Wakhi, Farsiwan, Nuristani, Baluch, Brahui, Qizilbash, Kabuli or Jat. The country has been described by journalist Tom Coghlan as “one of the most conservative, opaque and dizzyingly complex tribal societies on earth.”

Second, President Hamid Karzai’s “national” government has little to do with the lives of Afghanis outside Kabul and isn’t even recognized in every sector of that city. Classic counterinsurgency doctrine depends on an indigenous government we can support, but the current national government in Afghanistan doesn’t remotely qualify, unless one considers “worthy” a corrupt government bordering on a kleptocracy, with little real power over 90 percent of the country.

Third, our military presence is a double-edged sword. No country likes to be occupied, patrolled or garrisoned by a foreign military. Our own Founders didn’t take very well to it 233 years ago. The presence of U.S. troops in Afghanistan to suppress violence and promote peace is often the match that ignites the violence and resistance in the first place. Afghanis have always opposed the presence of large numbers of armed outsiders, and our

troops, no matter how well intentioned, will be viewed the same way that Macedonian, British and Soviet troops were viewed in the past.

Before the United States commits its already stretched and weary forces, financial resources and battered reputation to another colossal geopolitical blunder, Congress and the Obama administration need to begin at the beginning and take the time to absorb a little history and contemporary culture of Afghanistan. Against a backdrop of knowledge, we need to ask and answer some very practical questions about our expectations there, including:

- What can we realistically achieve? What kind of Afghanistan do we want to leave behind?
- Must it be a working democracy with freely elected officials and a centralized government?
- Would it be sufficient to leave a region able to deny terrorists safe haven?
- What agreements with Pakistan will be necessary to curb or end the ability of Al Qaeda to commute to work from Pakistan?
- What will our relationship be with the Taliban?
- What will that require? How many troops and other military resources, at what cost and for how long?

Thoughtful and careful consideration of circumstances, goals and alternatives before committing to a course of action was supposed to be one of the hard lessons we learned in Vietnam more than 40 years ago and, again, in Iraq six years ago. Absent a clear and achievable objective and a realistic assessment of the cost to achieve the objective, the United States should not commit a single additional soldier, sailor, airman or Marine to Afghanistan.

So what is a “clear and achievable objective”? A starting point would be to simply ensure that Afghanistan is not a terrorist safe haven for groups with the ability to attack the United States. In other words, Afghanistan would become a counterterrorism, rather than counterinsurgency, operation.

Pursuit of this limited goal does not mean walking away from Afghanistan or abandoning its people. The United States could still provide substantial financial, logistic, intelligence and other support to an Afghan government and security forces. It would, however, be a critical step toward a realistic approach to American goals in Afghanistan and a step away from a fanciful and messianic vision of “fixing” a nation that is simply not fixable by outsiders.